

Significant pushback against South Bethlehem Historic District planning study

The Bethlehem Gadfly Southside May 12, 2021

 *The latest in a series of posts on the Southside* 

South Bethlehem Historic District Planning Study

Design Guidelines . . . in the South Bethlehem Historic Conservation District

Community Development Committee meeting May 11, 2021 video

“In the last five years, we’ve seen the development demand just skyrocket [on the Southside].”
City Planning Director Heller

“I don’t see any consolidated comments from the members of the Historic Conservation Commission themselves. I also don’t see any mention of the South Bethlehem Historical Society.”
Councilwoman Van Wirt

“My viewpoint is that the HCC has been doing a great job.”
Councilwoman Van Wirt

“The tension isn’t between this big plot here and that big plot there, it’s capitalism. That’s what the tension is here. It’s capitalism.”
Councilwoman Van Wirt

“As a City Council person representing the public, I am not comfortable with the recommendations to raise the height.”
Councilwoman Van Wirt

“There’s not a whole lot of public comment at all supporting raising building’s heights.”
Councilwoman Van Wirt

“Some of my greatest concerns . . . have to do with shadows and the corridors which these heights would create.”

Councilwoman Van Wirt

“Sometimes in our push for development, we ruin the treasure that we have.”

Councilwoman Van Wirt

“I do not feel that inclusionary zoning produces the number that is needed to actually offset our shortage [of affordable housing]. It’s barely a drop in the bucket. and they are really not even affordable.”

Councilwoman Van Wirt

“I have grave concerns over the infringement of the pressure of capitalism.”

Councilwoman Van Wirt

“I understand the benefits for our tax base, but I really think that following these guidelines of height are really going to end up destroying the thing that we love the most.”

Councilwoman Van Wirt

The new reports (linked above) coming out of the City’s planning study of the South Bethlehem Historic District discussed last night at Council’s Community Development Committee are long, detailed, and admirable.

But what has been referred to many times in various discussions of Southside development lately as the “elephant in the room” — the building height proposals — was virtually the sole focus of last night’s meeting.

Gadfly followers have seen the height of recently proposed Southside projects dominate attention. A major purpose of the City study is to eliminate the tension between the City zoning ordinance and the much narrower Historic District guidelines administered by the volunteer Historic Conservation Commission (HCC).

Dedicated Southsiders have **with one voice** decried the various tall buildings proposed in violation of the Historic District guidelines.

The study proposes to drop the 150ft. height (approx 13-14 stories) now allowed by our zoning ordinance in the core of the Historic District to 90ft (approx 7-8 stories). The Zest/Benner building at 306 S. New, for instance, is 85ft., and thus, to take one example, buildings even slightly higher would be permitted all along the S. New St. corridor.

Many of those Southsiders showed up again last night to argue for reduction of the 90ft proposal, but this time they found a powerful ally in CDC chair Paige Van Wirt.

Gadfly will return to provide other details of the meeting, but to Gadfly the night belonged to Van Wirt, and it is she on whom he will focus here.

Councilwoman Van Wirt's section of the discussion was about 25 mins. long. You can listen to the whole thing by going to the video link above and beginning at about min. 1:13:50.

But Gadfly has broken that section down into smaller chunks here for your listening convenience, with snippets of her words to whet your interest.

It's always better to hear the person, Gadfly suggests, rather than skimming the text.

Gadfly, for one, found the Councilwoman's questioning and straight talk enormously refreshing and reassuring.

No vote was planned or taken, and Gadfly is not sure exactly what the next step on consideration of the study will be.

He thinks the City was a bit taken aback at how the meeting unfolded.

“I don't see any consolidated comments from the members of the Historic Conservation Commission themselves. . . . I am extremely interested in what they have to say. I also don't see any mention of the

South Bethlehem Historical Society. . . . I think that these two entities have a reason for being, and they have a voice in this discussion. . . . That itself gave me a huge feeling of unease. . . . I think it's really important that the people who have been volunteering and protecting South Bethlehem's voice be heard.”

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“How much did this [the study] cost? . . . I called up the representative from the Pennsylvania Historic Museum Commission. He told me that any changes in our requirements for these commissions had to be run through them. . . . Will we get a chance to see what their feedback is? . . . We are talking about an overlay district. . . . An overlay district trumps the local zoning. . . . The whole purpose is to give a different set of regulations. . . . That is a set of design guidelines that has been intentionally done . . . with the intent of trumping the existing zoning code. . . . Where does this leave the HCC? . . . The experts are the HCC. . . . Where is HCC's role? . . . What we've done is essentially handicap the HCC. . . . We're not building 150ft buildings for one reason: the HCC is there to stop it. . . . My viewpoint is that the HCC has been doing a great job. . . . The tension isn't between this big plot here and big plot there, it's capitalism. That's what the tension is here. It's capitalism. . . . Right now, they've been doing this job all along. . . . The friction is coming from the developers I do not see the data on this [raising building height]. . . . The premise of this whole study for me is troubling. . . . Me, as a City Council person representing the public, I am not comfortable with the recommendations to raise the height.

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Only 30% of the respondents [to the survey] live in South Bethlehem. We need to do a much better job. . . . I read every single word of the survey, probably twice. Most of the comments were about too tall, too big, too new buildings downtown. There's not a whole lot of public comment at all supporting raising building's heights. . . . I'm concerned about that. . . . For the task force that you had, I was a little concerned that I couldn't see who was on it. Is it a big secret?

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Some of my greatest concerns about the increased density and height have to do with shadows and the corridors which these heights would create. I was really kind of confounded by the lines drawn for the 90ft area, particularly the area at the end of the Greenway right where it hits New St where there is a contentious building project. . . . It would cast permanent shadow on the Greenway, . . . I'm not saying I don't want development. . . . Sometimes in our push for development, we ruin the treasure that we have. . . . We're doing a really good job now protecting what we have to protect, and I have grave concerns over the infringement of the pressure of capitalism into this project. I understand always that development brings new taxes, but so does good smart development And I don't think it's if you don't do these tall buildings, you don't get, development, not at all, I think you get really good small builders, small storefronts, not ones that are empty for years on end. . . . You get what the community needs when you let the community in under the current recommendations.

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The Planning Director and the head of the Department of Community and Economic Development took some time to explain that the purpose of this study and to make clear that the study and the recommendations are not to be understood as evidence that the HCC has not been doing a good job.

I think that's a bone of contention that really needs to be clarified. . . . To the argument that [developers] do all this work and then come in and find out it's a historic district, you know, buyer beware. That's on them. If they have consistency . . . they are gong to follow the guidelines. . . . Refer those [developers] to [the Historic District guidelines]. This is a great document.

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One of the other things that I wanted to be very clear about is there is a huge need for affordable housing. . . . I think that the most powerful thing you can do within the context of what we're talking about is exactly what you have proposed in streamlining the process. . . . But I am not

convinced and I am not comfortable with the idea that we would modify any zoning ordinances to allow greater density at the height that is being proposed in order to have inclusionary zoning. . . . I do not feel that inclusionary zoning produces the number that is needed to actually offset our shortage. It's barely a drop in the bucket. and they are really not even affordable. They're for moderate income people. I'm really uncomfortable with the idea that we may be considering even allowing greater height and density in order to encourage these developers to throw in some affordable units. The data is just not there. . . . We've had this embedded in our zoning codes since 2012, and when I asked you how many people had used it, the answer was zero. . . . We can't build our way out of this affordable housing crisis. . . . The developers are the ones who want these changes happening, and I understand the benefits for our tax base, but I really think that following these guidelines of height are really going to end up destroying the thing that we love the most."

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ref: **On the Southside, size matters**

ref: **Maybe last chance Tuesday to control appropriate building height on the Southside**